

VZCZCXRO3290
PP RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHUJA #1327/01 1731355
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 221355Z JUN 07
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9987
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW 0397
RUEHCD/AMCONSUL CIUDAD JUAREZ 0398
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 7216
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001327

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/18/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [NI](#)
SUBJECT: NIGERIAN ISLAMIC LEADERSHIP RELUCTANTLY SUPPORTS
YAR'ADUA

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Classified By: Political Counselor Russell J. Hanks for reasons 1.4 (b & d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: PolOff met on June 19 with the Secretary General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) Dr. Lateef Adegbite to discuss Nigerian Islamic leadership support for President Yar'Adua and Nigeria's participation in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), for which the NSCIA has pressed since its founding in ¶1973. Although the NSCIA, speaking on behalf of the principal Nigerian Muslim leaders from around the country, expressed reluctant support for Yar'Adua and promised to work with him in the interests of the Nigerian people, Adegbite noted that such cooperation was contingent on Yar'Adua "proving" himself a capable leader, worthy of loyalty. He added that the NSCIA would work to capitalize upon the fact that Yar'Adua was a Muslim to "compel" him to more actively rally around Islamic causes, including more vigorous participation in the OIC. Yar'Adua is acutely aware that he lacks popular legitimacy, and by courting religious leaders, he hopes possibly to garner some semblance of credibility with an influential sector of Nigerian society. The Islamic leadership, for its part, is, on the one hand going through the motions in a country where religion is so elemental and ubiquitous and, on the other hand, lobbying to make certain it remains visible and relevant. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) NSCIA President and the Sultan of Sokoto Mohammed Sa'ad Abubakar accompanied by a sixty five-member delegation of Nigeria's most prominent Islamic leadership paid a June 18 courtesy call on President Umaru Yar'Adua. In his remarks, Sultan Abubakar congratulated Yar'Adua on his election to office and pledged the support of the Sultanate and Nigeria's Islamic leadership. (Note: Complete text of Sultan's remarks available via email request.) In response, Dr. Adegbite confided that President Yar'Adua thanked the Sultan for his support and promised him that he would act on his advice. He also vowed to support the newly-established National Hajj Commission, which obligates the Government of Nigeria to help finance and organize the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Yar'Adua did not, however, broach the issue of electoral reforms or the electoral tribunals when asked by the Sultan.

¶3. (C) Adegbite asserted that Nigeria's Islamic leadership

supports Yar'Adua, albeit reluctantly. He agreed that the elections were "seriously flawed" and a major "disappointment" but was resigned to the fact that religious leaders must "do business with whoever is in the saddle." He added that the election of a Muslim president from the North was a "foregone conclusion." Though the issue was not wholly about who was in power, but rather "how he got there," Muslim leaders like the Nigerian population at large are "helpless" to do anything about it. While Yar'Adua is perceived to be an "Obasanjo puppet," Adegbite opined, in the interest of public safety, his election "will not be challenged by the Islamic leadership." He expected Yar'Adua to "fully concede and support" Muslim causes during his tenure, noting at the same time that the Government has historically been careful to balance religious sensibilities in Nigeria. The June 18 meeting was not the first such meeting between Muslim leaders and President Yar'Adua. Other prominent Islamic leaders, including the Assembly of Muslims in Nigeria Chairman Shaykh Sharif Al-Hussaini, met with Yar'Adua on June 11 to show their support for the new president. Adegbite dismissed the June 11 meeting as "unfortunate", calling Shaykh Al-Hussaini and other attendees "charlatans" and "non-mainstream."

14. (C) When asked about Nigeria's participation in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Dr. Adegbite contended that the NSCIA was instrumental in persuading the Government of Nigeria (GON) to apply for OIC member status in 2005. He noted that since the founding of the OIC, Nigeria's Islamic leadership has been exhorting the GON to apply for full membership in recognition of Nigeria's burgeoning Muslim population, geopolitical importance in Africa, and protracted relationship with the Arab Muslim world. Successive administrations refused to concede, claiming that they did not want to undermine Nigeria's secular character and upset the religious sensibilities of its equally significant Christian population. In 1986, Ibrahim Babangida dispatched Minister of Petroleum Resources Ridwan Lugman to attend an

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OIC Foreign Ministers meeting in Morocco. The decision to send a high-level representative to the OIC sparked widespread protests from Nigerian Christian leaders, who believed that such a move infringed upon the secular perimeters of the Nigerian Constitution. The meeting resulted in Nigeria achieving full membership, though Adegbite cautions that "this was on paper only."

15. (C) The NSCIA praised President Obasanjo for "making concessions to the Muslims" by pledging to make Nigeria's OIC membership more active and tangible, as evidenced by Obasanjo's endorsement of the Finance Ministry's recommendation to borrow funds from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), a division of the OIC Finance Subcommittee. In 2005, as an OIC member, Nigeria became eligible to receive IDB funding. Minister of Finance Ngozi Onkonjo-Iweala in May 2006 brokered an agreement with the IDB, entitling the GON to 400 million USD in interest-free loans. With the election of a northern Muslim president, the NSCIA believes, Adegbite noted, that they can "compel" President Yar'Adua to rally around Islamic causes. Adegbite disclosed that the NSCIA will soon push Yar'Adua to attend the OIC Conference of Heads of State and Government when it convenes in late 2007, thereby potentially representing the first time a Nigerian Head of State has attended the OIC.

16. (C) COMMENT: Clearly, Yar'Adua is aware of his tenuous claim to the presidency. His courting of religious leaders, particularly Muslim leaders, demonstrates his ability to co-opt and exploit the Nigerian Islamic leadership, as past Nigerian Heads of State have routinely done. It remains to be seen whether these Muslim leaders can concomitantly exploit their proximity to the President. That two separate Muslim delegations visited the President on June 11 and 18 reveals erstwhile fissures in the ranks of the Muslim leadership. The NSCIA's support for Yar'Adua is expected and unsurprising since as its President the Sultan) who

receives federal and state funds to finance the Emirate Council and maintain the Sultan's Palace in Sokoto) is a patron of the Government. At the same time, however, the NSCIA and other Islamic organizations speak, at least in theory, for Nigeria's Muslim population. By addressing Yar'Adua, thereby conferring legitimacy on his presidency, the Nigerian Islamic leadership also hopes to convince Nigeria's Muslims to do the same, dissuading them from acting out against what many of them perceive to be an illegitimate government. END COMMENT.
CAMPBELL